



From *Governing*
September 2006 iss

TRANSPORTATION COLUMN
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Soft on Sprawl

A popular planning book praises sprawl and ignores the mess left by misguided transportation policies.

Planning books rarely make the leap from Olympian hardback to more plebeian (and profitable) paperback because, well, most people don't read planning books. So it's news that Robert Bruegmann's "Sprawl: A Compact History" will come out in paperback in October.

It's easy to see why this book caught on: It is highly readable. The author, an art historian from Chicago, takes us on a journey around the world and shows us different types of sprawl in places such as Germany, Italy, India and Thailand. He also gives a short history of large-scale planning efforts, such as the Garden Cities movements and development in post-war London.

What makes the book dismaying, however, is that Bruegmann is essentially wrong in his overall thesis, which is that sprawl is mostly a product of people buying what they want and therefore a good thing. In Bruegmann's view, sprawl has given the middle class the type of large homes that only the aristocracy once enjoyed. Side effects such as loss of open space or traffic congestion are explained away, and sprawl critics are called cultural elitists.

While praising sprawl as a populist triumph, Bruegmann discounts other explanations for sprawl, such as government-built highways and transportation spending and policies. That's what most concerns me.

In my view, government transportation spending — local, state and federal — largely has created low-density, dispersed development. Simply put, a subdivision, office park or shopping mall can't exist without a government-built road or grade-separated, limited-access freeway nearby. Just as early-19th-century canals produced canal-centered cities, just as streetcar lines and railroads a century ago produced streetcar suburbs and railroad-centered towns, so too

freeways and roads in the 20th century produced sprawl. Transportation always has shaped development patterns, and government largely has shaped transportation. This trend stretches from the days when ancient Rome built roads across Europe to the modern era of states building highways and airports.

What makes contemporary sprawl so different is that in the past, development usually hugged canal, train station or port. Now, roads and airports act as dispersers, flinging development out like a salad spinner. The degree to which a country sprawls can be predicted by looking at its overall transportation budget and the percentages spent on centralizing mediums, such as mass transit, and decentralizing mediums, such as highways.

Bruegmann tries to get around tying sprawl to a particular mode of transport by saying that cities have “sprawled from time immemorial.” Even the wealthy ancient Romans, Bruegmann notes, liked their villas in the country. But this is a false analogy. Sure, there were a few homes and farms outside a medieval city, but living just outside the walls of Barcelona in 1200 A.D. is simply not the same as living 50 miles from Houston and commuting along Interstate 10.

At one point Bruegmann says, “There is no particular reason to think that the decentralization caused by roads has been any different in kind than that caused by the railroads.”

But railroads a century ago caused cities such as New York and Chicago to expand. That’s not the same as decentralization. Overall densities were higher in cities after railroads were introduced than before, which is very different than what happened after highways were introduced. This is a matter of physics. Simply put, you can’t cram a lot of homes and businesses around a highway because all the cars used by the residents or workers need to be stored somewhere. Railway stations don’t have that problem. Plus, you need many more lanes of highway to transport the same number of people that one rail line can.

Bruegmann criticizes mass transit for not relieving traffic congestion. But mass transit seldom relieves traffic jams. What it does do is provide an alternative to them. Bruegmann also suggests that bringing highways into center cities might have improved access to them, ignoring the cancer of parking lots the freeways prompted and the surface streets they cut off.

There can be a difference between what we choose individually with our dollars and what we choose collectively with our votes. I personally would like to live in as large a home as possible but I’d also like to live in a neighborhood with easy access to mass transit, plenty of bike paths and few big highways. That these desires conflict and must be balanced between my personal and collective decision making is something I recognize and accept.

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